

# This Day in History... March 4, 1924

## “Happy Birthday to You”

On March 4, 1924, the song and melody of “Happy Birthday to You” were printed in a songbook. One of the world’s most famous songs, it has been the center of controversy over ownership and copyright status for years.

According to tradition, the tune we all know today as “Happy Birthday” was originally written in the late 1800s as “Good Morning to All.” Sisters Patty and Mildred Hill claimed they wrote the song for kindergartners in Louisville, Kentucky.

The sisters wanted to create a song that would be easy for the children to sing.



From the 1988 Special Occasions set

In the coming years, versions of the song appeared in various books, some which included the “Happy Birthday” lyrics in a later verse, though it’s unknown who actually wrote them. Then on March 4, 1924, Clayton Sunny printed the melody and “Happy Birthday” lyrics together in a songbook. This was reportedly at the request of Jessica Hill, sister of Patty and Mildred.

The “Happy Birthday” song quickly caught on and soon it was being used without royalties. In 1931, it was in the Broadway musical *The Band Wagon*. Western Union also used it in their first singing telegram, leading Jessica to campaign for the song to be copyrighted. In 1934, she managed to secure a copyright for “Happy Birthday” because of its similarities to “Good Morning to All.” The following year, several piano arrangements and an unused verse of “Happy Birthday to You” were copyrighted by the Summy Company, crediting Preston Ware Orem for the piano arrangements and Mrs. R.R. Forman for the lyrics. However, his claim was later found to be baseless.

The Hill family had the copyright for the song if it was used for profit through 1991. This was then extended to 2030. In 1988, Warner Music assumed ownership of the copyright and received \$2 million in royalties every year for it. They claimed copyright for the song anytime it was used in film, television, radio, and anywhere in the public where the majority of the people singing weren’t family or friends.

Over the years, some argued the validity of the copyright, particularly the fact that it’s unknown who wrote the lyrics to “Happy Birthday.” Beginning in 2010, a campaign was launched to disprove the Hills’s ownership of the melody. In 2013, a filmmaker took Warner Music to court over the song. Then in 2015, a judge ruled that the song wasn’t under copyright, and royalties wouldn’t need to be paid to Warner Music anymore. This made the song part of the public domain.

According to the *Guinness Book of World Records*, “Happy Birthday to You” is the most popular song in the English language.



Stamp from the 1987 Special Occasions set

Reportedly, they may have taken some of the tune and lyrical ideas from other existing songs, such as “Happy Greetings to All” “Good Night to You All,” “A Happy New Year to All,” and “A Happy Greeting to All.”

The sisters’ song went “Good morning to you, Good morning to you, Good morning, dear children, Good morning to all.” The sisters first published the tune in their songbook, *Song Stories for Kindergarten* in 1893. It’s likely that the class may have added in “Happy Birthday” to the tune to celebrate the childrens’ birthdays, which may have led to later printings including “Happy Birthday.”



Happy Birthday stamp issued in February 2002.



This stamp was issued later in 2002 to meet the increased postal rate.



This stamp was issued in 2006 for another rate increase.

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